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C O N F I D E N T I A L HANOI 001283

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STATE FOR EAP/MLA AND EAP/CM

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#) [CN](#)

SUBJECT: VIETNAM MFA DISPUTES DETAILS OF ARTICLE ON CLASH
WITH CHINA OVER SPRATLYS

REF: A. REF: A. HANOI 1076

[1](#)B. B. HANOI1119

Classified By: Ambassador Michael W. Marine. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) A July 19 Straits Times article reported that a group of Vietnamese boats fishing in waters near the Spratlys came "under fire" from Chinese naval vessels on July 9. According to the article Vietnamese "military sources" reported that one fishermen was killed and several others were injured and one of the Vietnamese boats sank after the attack. According to the article, two of Vietnam's Russian-designed BPS-500 fast-attack craft raced to the scene, but kept their distance because of the superior firepower of the Chinese vessels.

[1](#)2. (C) On July 20, Pol Assistant asked Deputy Director Nguyen Manh Hien of the MFA Maritime Affairs Department's Committee on Frontier Issues for confirmation of details in the article. Hien identified three significant inaccuracies in the article:

- The incident took place at the end of June, not July 9 (Hien did not explicitly confirm deaths);
- It occurred near the Woody Island (known as Phu Lam in Vietnamese), in the Paracels (not the Spratlys); and,
- Vietnam did not dispatch its ships to the scene.

[1](#)3. (C) Hien claimed that the MFA "is not working on this issue," but stated that Vietnam and China continue to work together to avoid incidents. He noted "such incidents have happened often and will likely occur again," but he hoped the unfortunate fishermen caught in the middle would be treated more humanely next time. Hien declined to comment when asked whether the incident represented a Chinese attempt to increase pressure in the area given that it took place in an area that is neither on Vietnam's continental shelf nor an area where British Petroleum or ConocoPhillips have operated.

[1](#)4. (C) Comment: Given the lack of previous press reporting on this sensitive issue, we are surprised that this MFA official even confirmed to us that it had taken place. The use of force in the South China Sea is a matter which evokes deep emotions and will feed anti-China sentiments here. Now that the fact clashes have occurred has been reported in the press, it will be interesting to see how Hanoi chooses to deal with the issue. Remaining silent could be seen as a sign of weakness in the face of bullying by Beijing.

MARINE